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## ABSTRACT

The Communication across the Curriculum (CAC) program at the University of Melbourne (Australia) was set up in a top-down manner, which was partly driven by outside pressures. Although informed by writing-across-the-curriculum theory and practice, the program reflects the university's original concern about the teaching of communication skills by addressing oral, written, visual, electronic, small group, interpersonal skills, for academic and professional purposes. The program includes direct teaching of students in guest lectures and workshops; consultations and special projects with individual staff members; tutor development; teaching short writing skills courses; and networking with the communication skills community nationally and internationally. In its second year, the project has learned something about staff concerns: their relative lack of concern about student writing; students' poor oral and interpersonal skills; and concerns about "the first year experience" and large classes. Given the teaching workload and lack of coordinated policies about teaching and learning, five challenges for the program are: (1) university policy concerning students; (2) curriculum review; (3) interest in online technology; (4) external forces; and (5) lack of CAC funding. The program has made some headway in establishing a CAC community at the grassroots level, but it still needs a steering committee to develop policy; and it still needs to develop more top-down interest and support. (Contains 8 references.) (RS)

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Paper presented at the 1998 4 C's Convention, Chicago, Illinois

## Breaking with Precedent: Community-Based Development of a CAC Program

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### INTRODUCTION

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In his call for program proposals, Victor Villanueva invited us to present our ideas and narratives, and for each of us to tell our stories. The assumption when we tell stories is that our listeners will find what we have to say interesting, entertaining, perhaps valuable or uplifting - even if that story may seem somewhat odd to listeners. Victor also spoke of the breaking of precedents, and of how in our community of teachers of college composition and communication, our differences are outweighed by our similarities. So - in telling the story of the establishment of a Communication Across the Curriculum (CAC) program at a large Australian University, I will be tracing a story in which the context is very different from that of most WAC or CAC programs in the USA. The precedents which we are breaking are located within Australian university teaching. In addition, although our CAC program derives from US WAC programs, we depart from WAC precedents. Essentially, I will be telling the story of how WAC travels to international contexts. And let me forewarn you that our story will contain some elements which are very odd and some which are familiar to you.

### THE CONTEXT for CAC

Let me first present some key aspects of Australian universities, as well as specifics details about the University of Melbourne, that place our CAC program in context.

#### Terminology

In Australia, 'Faculty' means a major disciplinary field (eg the Faculty of Medicine) not staff.

A Department is a sub-field within a Faculty (eg the Department of English within the Faculty of Arts)

#### The Australian tertiary education system

You may need a fair amount of background because the Australian tertiary education system is very different from yours.

In Australia there are 37 universities (of which only two are private) and a larger number of TAFEs (Technical and Further Education institutes) which are like junior colleges, but whose graduates have limited transfer access into the university system.

The 37 universities fall into groups according to their age and origins. The University of Melbourne is one of the self-proclaimed Group of 8 "sandstone" universities -- the oldest, most traditional, research-driven institutions, which claim the greatest prestige. So, while the University of Melbourne is not typical of all Australian universities, most of them aspire to be like the Group of 8 - the ethos is the same for all.

### **The University of Melbourne**

Is the second oldest in Australia (founded 1853) and considers itself one of the best.

#### Demographics

Number of students	29,900
Full-time students	69%
Graduate students	27%
Local non-English-speaking background	6%
Overseas students	10 %
Indigenous	0.3%
Rural students	14%
Lower socio -economic status	8%
Female	55%
Staff/student ratio	1:16.4

There is a major city campus and 10 other small specialised campuses. There are 11 Faculties (including Arts, Science, Education, Law, Medicine, Engineering)

Funding comes from the government and from overseas student fees. Local students pay fees (which can be deferred until they are in the workplace), which do not cover the full cost of their education. There are some scholarships for merit.

Student body -- Students need good high-school results to gain a place in almost all Faculties at Melbourne, which partly accounts for demographics. They are mainly commuter students from the Melbourne area. Many live at home (leaving hometown for study is rare in Australia).

### **Curriculum**

There are 2 salient features:

(1) At the U of M there is no general education program or requirement and this is typical of Australian universities.

- Arts and Science are the generalist degrees. Arts, Science, Economics offer 3-year degree program with an optional 4th year at honours level. Students do study a major, but the concept is not as strongly stressed as in the USA.
- The "professional" degrees -- Engineering, Medicine, Architecture etc are longer study programs (4 - 6 years) entered directly in first year of study.
- Combined degrees are increasingly popular both for personal enrichment and for professional purposes (eg Arts/Commerce; Science/Engineering)
- Graduates can enter a PhD directly, or do Masters Degree first. Many postgraduate diplomas are offered.

(2) At the U of M there is no writing program, no freshman or upper division composition instruction, no designated writing intensive courses. No writing requirement for graduation. This is the norm at Australian universities.

## Teaching and learning context

### Tertiary language, literacy and communication skills policies

Note on terminology: tertiary literacy and communication skills are often interchangeable terms (and are conceived of as implying development, not remediation).

In some Australian universities there are policies in place covering aspects of tertiary language, literacy and communication skills. At a 1996 conference in Australia on Tertiary Literacy, Dick Baldauf from the national languages body (1997) argues the need for such policies, and points out that no university has a comprehensive policy.

The U of M has no such policy. Individual Faculties or Departments may list communication skills among their objectives - often without specifying how these skills will be developed. Communication skills subjects are offered by some Faculties or Departments, and may be either obligatory or electives (eg *Science and Communication* is an obligatory in first year Agriculture subject; but *Communication Skills* subjects offered in the Dept. of Computer Science and in the Faculty of Arts are electives).

### Support for students' tertiary literacy and language skills

There is a smorgasbord of support programs for various groups, which have been set up over the years in response to perceived needs of students, or staff perceptions of shortcomings in students. Alison Lee (1991) comments that much of this support derives from a one-on-one counselling model for dealing with tertiary literacy, rather than from social practice approaches which would integrate tertiary literacy and communication skills into content instruction.

At U of M there are long-standing support programs, such as the ESL Program and the Learning Skills Unit, which operates the equivalent of a writing centre (although different from those in the US).

#### Staff development

It is rare for there to be combined teaching and learning skills units in Australian universities (Lee, 1991). This is the case at the U of M, where the Centre for the Study of Higher Education runs staff training workshops across the University. Tutor (TA) training depends on individual departments, and is very uneven.

#### Departmentalism

There is competition for students across Faculties (because of funding considerations), so cross-faculty enterprises are limited.

#### Summing up the context for CAC

Student learning often seen as a deficit issue with a resulting tendency to refer students to support programs, rather than as part of the induction of students by content teachers into discourse communities.

The concept of writing or communicating in order to learn content is not well-recognised. There is no concept of WAC, CAC, Writing or Speaking Intensive courses.

### THE CAC PROJECT at U of M

#### **Origins**

CAC was set up in a top - down manner, which was partly driven by outside pressures. There have been a number of employer surveys about skills which graduates bring to the workplace. These surveys often cite poor oral and written communication skills.

There have also been reports on the quality of higher education (eg *Priorities for Reform in Higher Education*, 1990; *Changing the Culture: Engineering Education into the Future*, 1996) which mention the need to develop students' communication skills.

At the U of M, the impetus for communication skills instruction came from the previous Vice-Chancellor (David Penington in 1994) who was concerned when employers told him that graduates from the U of M were well-prepared in terms of content knowledge, but had poor communication skills. This led to the establishment of a new Communication Skills Program, which was combined with the well-established English as a Second Language Program into the Centre for Communication Skills and ESL within the Faculty of Arts, beginning in 1995. Funding for 3 years was granted, and 5 Communication Skills subjects

were offered, open to students across the curriculum, but not as a major. Unfortunately, no further funding was granted at end of 1997.

In another top-down move, the Director of the Centre was encouraged by Dean of Arts to propose a CAC project. This resulted in a University Strategic Planning Fund grant for two full-time lecturers for 3 years. We were appointed to these positions early in 1997.

## **The CAC project**

Definition. Ours is a CAC rather than a WAC program, reflecting the University's original concern about the teaching of communication skills. Our program addresses oral, written, visual, electronic, small group, interpersonal skills, for academic and professional purposes.

### Theoretical and pedagogical approach

Our work is informed by WAC theory and practice, and we have heeded some of the lessons from WAC history. We read with particular interest an article by Russell (1987) on two WAC programs in the US which began in the late 1940s and were based on the post WW2 communication movement. Their death in the late 1960s was partly the result of persistent inertia among academics about dealing themselves with student writing, and the difficulties of maintaining an interdepartmental program.

Our preferred approach is social constructivist, following Driscoll (1994), though it is not always appropriate to push this approach too far with academic staff. We promote goal-based, collaborative learning and believe that the development of students' communication skills aids their learning as students, and their lifelong learning processes.

### Our practice

1. Direct teaching of students in team-teaching of communication skills subjects within the Faculties and Departments. This involves curriculum and materials development with content teaches. eg *Communication Skills* in Department of Computer Science, *Science and Communication* , Institute of Land and Food Resources.
2. Direct teaching of students in guest lectures, workshops, seminars. eg Critical Thinking in Physiology.
3. Consultations and special projects with individual staff members, Departments and Faculties. eg developing a Student Guide for the School of Postgraduate Nursing; evaluation of the peerwork and online delivery of a Criminology subject.

4. Staff seminars on incorporating communication skills into content teaching.
5. Tutor (TA) development and orientation programs.
6. Direct teaching of short non-credit courses for postgraduates. Participation in postgraduate orientation programs. Development of policy on the editing of postgraduate written work.
7. Materials development both on- and off-line.
8. Teaching short writing skills courses to University administrative staff.
9. Outreach outside University - commercial short courses, and volunteer work.
10. Research projects, publications
11. Networking with communication skills community nationally and internationally. Organising the Australian Communication Skills Conference, October 1998.

## THE CHALLENGE - ESTABLISHING OUR OWN COMMUNITY

We are now in the 2nd year of establishing the CAC project, with a clear need to generate both grass-roots support and powerful mentors. There is also no national body of CAC teachers.

### **Early lessons: a needs survey for CAC?**

You might think that running a needs survey would be a good way of establishing our own CAC community. But we decided not to do that at once. A lot of other initiatives were and are going on in the University and in Australian tertiary education, so there was enormous competition for the attention of academics (the next point in this paper). We knew of needs surveys in other areas which had been carried out: time was spent, but nothing much happened after the report-writing. Sure you get information, but that doesn't mean that in the end academic staff who perceive needs are ready or able to satisfy them by making changes in the teaching and learning contexts.

We had already been set up, so we figured it was better to go ahead and learn by doing. We had no idea how a CAC program would work out - it was so new. Therefore, a needs survey was better left till later.

From contacts made and projects carried out so far, we have learned something about staff concerns:



- Staff are concerned about student writing, but in a fairly low-key way. This relative lack of concern may spring from the fact that the U of M requires top high-school scores (although that alone does not guarantee good written communication). Also, high schools in our state demand a lot of writing in all subjects, with multiple drafts and revisions (actually a problem because of dependency and spoon-feeding, especially in private schools, which contribute a huge % of U of M students).
- Oral, interpersonal skills, small group work - seen as poor.
- Critical thinking often seen as poor & needing development.
- Concerns re the "first year experience" and large classes
- Tutors and demonstrators want more preparation.

Concerns by students: They are not always keen on first year communication skills instruction, which is not seen as critical to content knowledge, except among those who are interested in media studies or journalism. There is more student interest in communication skills in upper years.

### **Competition for the attention of teaching staff**

Given the teaching staff workload, lack of coordinated policies about teaching and learning there are a number of challenges in establishing a CAC community. Yet, these same challenges can be seen as providing opportunities for CAC to establish grass-roots support. There are 5 challenges to consider:

#### 1. University policy concerning students

- *Internationalisation* is the current buzz word with a drive to increase the number of overseas, full-fee-paying students, and also a desire for the University to be one of the Great World Universities.
- *Cultural Diversity*. The final draft of the University's Cultural Diversity policy has just been circulated. The section on teaching and learning states that the University "is committed to providing a teaching and learning environment that enables all students to reach their potential". The implementation of the policy in curriculum-design and pedagogy has yet to be discussed.
- *The Support Matrix* . As I mentioned earlier in this paper, there have always been a number of support bodies on campus. In 1997 the Support Matrix was set up in an effort to work against the piecemeal approach and overlaps by providers.

*Opportunity for CAC:* As yet, only lip service is paid to the concept that it is every staff member's responsibility to support students, not only by referring them to support services, but in their own teaching. There is potential for CAC to



establish a grass-roots community by showing that building direct communication skills instruction into teaching across the curriculum will help teachers to address internationalization, cultural diversity and support issues in the classroom.

## 2. Curriculum review

Curriculum review is partly driven by competition for students, the job marketplace, and accountability to the nation and to fee-paying students. So, there are concerns about what to teach, and a growing recognition of the importance of incorporating teaching of communication skills into the curriculum.

*Opportunity for CAC:* A community of Heads of Department, curriculum co-ordinators, and content instructors could rely on CAC for advice and help in how to incorporate communication skills teaching into content classrooms.

## 3. Teaching and learning = Information Technology

At present, teachers who are interested in transforming their teaching and fostering their students' learning are encouraged to channel that interest into using online technology (loosely called IT). \$4 million Australian dollars have been released through the University's Multimedia Education Unit over the last couple of years.

Inspiration to the average lecturer comes from gatherings such as the 1997 "DITAM symposium -- Doing Information Technology at Melbourne". Essentially this was an all-day show and tell with free lunch! 400 teaching staff showed up to hear and see how their peers used online technology in all sorts of teaching and learning situations.

*Opportunity for CAC:* This interest in online technology - strongly pushed by the University -- is a major force competing with CAC for staff attention, but also a chance for CAC. Interest in online technology is content-neutral -- our challenge is to combine this interest with CAC activities.

## 4. External forces

Cuts to government funding of tertiary education have resulted in larger class sizes. Yet other external forces lend backing to our search for a communication skills community. These forces include calls for accountability and more effective teaching, and development of the skills which students need to demonstrate in order to gain employment.

## 5. Lack of CAC funding for staff retreats, etc.

# MEETING THE CHALLENGE

## **CAC policy and community formation**

The need to develop a sound policy and plan for the future of the CAC program, and the need to encourage a CAC community are two sides of the same coin.

### Community formation

There are lessons to be gained from the account by Sullivan, Lyon, Lebofsky, Wells and Goldblatt (1997) on the reform of the existing writing program at Temple University:

- Get academic staff to articulate 'strong needs'; ie, what they want their students to do within their disciplines, rather than student deficits.
- The more writing experts (or CAC experts) explain issues in their discipline clearly to other academics, the more their colleagues are willing to believe that we know what we are talking about.
- Writing teachers provide 'situated leadership' (getting rid of the concept of writing teachers as service providers). By exercising such leadership, WAC or CAC teachers establish "credibility by forming an imaginary disciplinary community of teachers interested in writing" (1997: 386). WAC and CAC teachers then provide their professional expertise to this community.

ie. we create our own institutional space within which our disciplinary knowledge can operate and become efficient (p. 387).

### CAC policy

Inspiration from the Australian context comes from Curtin University of Technology in Western Australia (where, as is typical of technical universities, communication skills teaching has a longer history than at institutions like the U of Melbourne). At Curtin, the cross-faculty CAC policy and plan for its implementation was developed through a process of consultation with key individuals and groups. The strong support of the Dean of Humanities and the participation by the University Academic Board provided top-down support.

### Changing attitudes

In describing the Curtin University experience, Professor Lesley Parker stressed that a policy itself is not enough. Commitment from teaching staff at all levels is necessary, and this entails a shift in attitudes among content teachers that they are also responsible for teaching discipline-specific communication skills - rather than seeing such teaching as a support issue.

We have made some headway with establishing a CAC community at grassroots level, though we still need a CAC steering committee to develop policy; and we need to develop more top-down interest and support.

That's episode one of our story.

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